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Veterans with service-connected disabilities would get expanded dental coverage under bipartisan legislation introduced by U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park.

The "Make Our Veterans Smile Act" (House Resolution 5595) was co-introduced by Kirk and fellow Navy Reserve intelligence officer U.S. Rep. Chris Carney, D-Pa.

Currently, only 100 percent disabled, homeless or prisoner-of-war veterans are eligible for dental benefits. The bill, if signed into law, expands dental coverage to any service-connected disabled veteran, regardless of disability rating starting Jan. 1, 2009.

"We need to ensure that those who wore the uniform, risked their lives and sacrificed so much are appropriately cared for," Kirk said Thursday. "We won a great victory for area veterans when we saved the North Chicago VA Hospital from closing. But the commitment the government makes to help care for disabled veterans is incomplete without addressing their dental needs."

According to the Veterans Administration, 258,000 veterans currently are eligible for dental benefits. More than 2.5 million additional disabled veterans would receive coverage under the Kirk-Carney bill.

In Illinois, coverage would expand from nearly 5,000 veterans to more than 60,000 veterans, according to the Congressional Research Service.